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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - Ambassador Hosts Humanitarian Roundtable

REF: A) Nairobi 2769 B) Nairobi 2429

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Ambassador Ranneberger hosted a roundtable meeting at Embassy Nairobi on December 10 with some of USAID's Somalia implementing partners. The discussion focused on the increasingly challenging operating environment in which aid assistance is being delivered in Somalia and the representatives echoed many of the themes outlined in reftel. Emphasis was placed on the unprecedented fragmentation of groups on the ground and the complete unpredictability of the daily operating environment. Most of our partners had either had one or more of their staff members killed or abducted this year. Some USAID partners have been forced to close life-saving operations. Participants in the meeting included UNICEF, UNDP, WFP, International Republican Institute, MedAir, Merlin, CARE, Mercy Corps and Interpeace. The exchanges were frank and the organizations offered useful recommendations and the Ambassador decided to hold these meetings on a more regular basis. End Summary.

The Dilemma of Saving Lives

¶2. (SBU) The organizations represented at the roundtable echoed the ethical and moral dilemmas in humanitarian assistance outlined in Ref A. Aid agencies must determine the extent of risk they are able to manage in the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Somalia. The World Food Program (WFP) lost two staff members in the past three months, and is in the process of determining its tolerance threshold - how many staff killed will be the tipping point to force the organization to close. Unfortunately, two of USAID's partners, CARE and the International Medical Corps (IMC), have been forced to close down operations in South/Central Somalia following threats from al-Shabaab. While WFP and ICRC are temporarily taking over the delivery of emergency food aid for CARE, assistance in other critical sectors previously provided by CARE has come to a halt. For example, UNICEF was relying on IMC to feed severely malnourished children in Baidoa, with IMC forced to close, UNICEF is unable to reach these children and has anticipated that children may have already died because lack of access to critical care.

Walking on a Tight Rope

¶3. (SBU) Aid agencies feel their association with the political process puts them at greater risk and compromises their neutrality. This is particularly challenging for the UN, which is the largest provider of humanitarian assistance and at the same time the largest supporter of the political process. The UN representative explained that the increased risk stems from the perception of the average

Somali that the political process is occurring outside the country and excludes too many parties. Striking a balance between the political process and humanitarian and development assistance is becoming an increasingly difficult act for USAID implementing partners.

Securing Aid Delivery
In an Insecure Environment

¶4. (SBU) WFP commented that at best, the combined efforts of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) might control 10 percent of the territories in south/central Somalia. It is within this context that WFP manages a massive food aid delivery program. While WFP has the supply side fairly under control, especially with the new European Union escort system established for food aid shipments, the actual delivery is quite complex. The biggest challenge for WFP is moving food out of the port of Mogadishu and to areas north of the capital. WFP recently had 35 trucks looted on this route. While AMISOM secures the port, it does not have the capacity to secure anything beyond this area to assist in the delivery of aid. WFP appealed to the US to pressure the TFG into allowing its contractors to move with armed security escorts (Ref B). While WFP operated in this manner in the past, the TFG banned armed security over a year ago. A request was made to the TFG and acknowledged but there has been no movement on the issue. WFP urged quick action in this regard if the distribution capacity is to be maintained.

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To Brand or not to Brand

¶5. (SBU) Many USAID partners have sought waivers due to the risks associated with visibly marking their programs as being U.S.-funded. While the US is the largest bi-lateral donor to Somalia, particularly due to its large humanitarian aid package, few Somalis are aware of this. Often U.S. representatives hear complaints from Somali officials that no one is aware of the extent of U.S. assistance. They agreed that the fact of U.S. support for Ethiopia was less relevant than the widespread belief that Ethiopia is acting at the behest of the U.S. government. Ethiopia's presence in Somalia is opposed by the majority of Somalis. One participant noted that in the context of the propaganda campaign launched by the hard-line Islamists, symbolism plays a very big role and they are alleging a Ethiopia-U.S. link to sway public opinion.

Risks of Minimum Monitoring

¶6. (SBU) USAID has been working in Somalia by "remote control" for the past three years since staff have been denied travel to the country. We rely on international NGOs and UN staff to monitor activities. Now even USAID implementing partners are operating through "remote control" meaning they have pulled out all expatriate staff from south/central Somalia and have a minimum of national staff employed. In many cases because of security, the national staff are sequestered in their homes and rarely venture to office compounds. In some instances, for example with the Center for Peace and Dialogue (CRD), national staff have been forced to flee Mogadishu and Kismayo altogether. Undoubtedly, accountability issues will arise that the U.S. and others will have to address.

Recommendations

¶7. (SBU) Our partners offered some concrete recommendations, agreeing that despite perceptions on the ground, the U.S. must continue its efforts to support the political process. They said that al-Shabaab is exploiting a vacuum that currently exists in leadership and governance. They also believed that the U.S. should

encourage an Ethiopian withdrawal, along the terms outlined in the Djibouti Agreement. They asked for help in drawing a distinction between political and development assistance on one hand and humanitarian assistance on the other, in order to preserve the neutrality of aid workers. Our partners also discussed the idea of using the NGO consortium to exert leverage against armed anti-government groups. One participant recommended a greater focus on programs in Somaliland, which can operate with minimal disruption. They asked for U.S. assistance in outreach to Gulf country donors and how to coordinate with Gulf-based NGOs.

¶8. (SBU) The participants welcomed the opportunity to meet with the Ambassador and the Somalia Unit in addition to USAID. They shared valuable perspectives from the ground and offered ideas on ways we could better support their efforts. The forum was useful and we will plan to meet on a more regular basis with our partners operating inside Somalia.

RANNEBERGER